

Jerome Markson and the birds of Tranby

An architect tours some of the streets he has helped alter over a six-decade career

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Is that an oriole or a hooded warbler? Over there, a blue jay or bridled titmouse?

On a rainy, overcast morning, architect Jerome Markson and I stroll - umbrellas in hand - along Tranby Avenue in the Annex, admiring the hand-painted birds in the many stained-glass transom windows on the street. But since we're no ornithologists, it's hard to distinguish the different species. And as Mr. Markson points out, it's easier to see these magnificent illustrations at dusk, when foyer lights illuminate them from behind.

"The birds of Tranby," declares Mr. Markson with a chuckle, adding that there ought to be a species field guide for urban walkers. In practice for more than a half-century and still going strong at the age of 78, Mr. Markson has agreed to take me on a field trip - or "architour" - of his own creation.

Tucked in behind the homes of Tranby is where he and wife Mayta lived for 22 years: a nine-unit, mews-type complex designed by architect-friends Jack Klein and Henry Sears in 1980. Today, the Marksons live just to the south in a Bloor Street condominium, since the Annex is one of their favourite neighbourhoods.

Print Edition - Section Front

"It's a beautiful example of a narrow street where the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker lived," he says of Tranby, "serving the people in the fancy Avenue Road and Bedford [Road] houses." It's also just the kind of street University of Toronto professor Eric Arthur lauds in his indispensable book, *Toronto: No Mean City* (University of Toronto Press, 1964).

Prof. Arthur was well known for his dual love of Toronto's Victorian architecture and the city's first fledgling attempts with the international style, and Mr. Markson seems to be of a similar mindset. While it's clear he loves the charms of Tranby and the street he and his wife lived on prior to that - Poplar Plains Crescent, where homes are of 1920s and '30s vintage - his work has never been derivative of those eras. That's despite the fact that there would have been very little, locally, from which to draw inspiration while attending the University of Toronto in the early 1950s: one or two curtain-walled buildings, perhaps, and no real concentration of modern homes. (Ground was broken

for Don Mills in 1953, the year he graduated.) In other words, to be a true modernist in those days meant one had to have conviction; his heroes, then as now, were Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Alvar Aalto.

"You know what inspired me?" he asks. "I used to beg my father when I was a kid to drive me to the waterfront so I could see the ships from all over the world."

Otherwise, he was forced to play, landlocked, in the alleyways behind his childhood home on Dundas Street, west of McCaul. His visits to the waterfront might also explain his later love of sailing.

Interestingly, gamboling in Grange Park, just a couple of hundred yards away from Mr. Markson's home, was another kid, also born in 1929, who idolized Frank Lloyd Wright and would become an architect and avid sailor himself: Frank Gehry.

Today, Mr. Gehry's first Toronto project is taking shape directly across the road from the house in which Mr. Markson "spent the first 13 years" of his life, and we're able to take in both simultaneously. With a clunky retail box grafted on to its front, the former Markson home doesn't look like much any more, but Mr. Gehry's addition, grafted on to the front of the Art Gallery of Ontario, seems elegant and almost like a ship's hull. "There's a logic to it," Mr. Markson decides.

We drive a few blocks north to Mr. Markson's elementary school, Orde Street Public School, which has a few design elements that remind him of Wright's work. "They ruled by fear is my memory of this place," he says. He points to the brick and says it might be a type called "John Price" from the Don Valley Brick Works, the supplier for Market Square - his award-winning 1980 luxury condominium megaproject on Front Street - before it shut down.

Twenty years earlier, in 1960, Mr. Markson had designed what I consider to be his most fascinating dwelling - the Moses residence in Hamilton. It's a barrel-vault roofed, light-as-a-creampuff, steel-and-glass beauty that's worthy of its own separate article.

We discuss why he felt compelled to balance these luxury commissions with public housing.

"The essence of Canadianism is helping each other," he begins. "I didn't have to intellectualize it very much, it was just something I felt - why am I doing these houses, what about all the people out there who need housing?"

Spread over about 15 acres near Dundas and Spadina and organized around a "crooked spine that connects to some of the old existing roads," Alexandra Park Cooperative's 627 units were Mr. Markson's first foray into that world, when he partnered with Klein & Sears and Webb Zerafa Menkes Housden in the mid-1960s.

"You can see that it is a tough set of buildings, built to withstand abuse. Today, the density would be too low, but it's what we were given," he says as we meander along its serpentine pathways.

Our conversation meanders, too: We talk about how the great European cities seem to "hang together" because of their "limited material palette.

"The white of southern Italy or Spain, the red brick around Toulouse, France," he explains, are there "because [designers] go for whatever [material] is in the ground." It's what he tried to do with the brick at Market Square and the St. Lawrence Neighbourhood on the Esplanade, which was deemed "the best residential architecture produced in Toronto in the 1970s and 1980s" by Frank Lewinberg in *East/West: A Guide to Where People Live in Downtown Toronto* (Coach House, 2000).

Mr. Markson estimates that he produced 10 projects in total during his two decades working for Ontario Housing Corp. and its various incarnations. We visit a few of these, including a senior's building at the corner of King Street West and Springhurst Avenue, where a turret was incorporated into the design to reflect the residential architecture on each of the other three street corners.

Next, we look at Cathedral Place on Cowan Avenue. "It's kind of lively," suggests Mr. Markson of the design that wraps around St. John's Polish National Catholic Cathedral. "It's like toothpaste: It squeezes into available space."

As we head home along King, we agree that Mies's one-storey banking pavilion at the Toronto-Dominion Centre is a "temple" and that Dufflet Rosenberg's pastries are the food of the gods. We discuss the flamboyance of Antonio Gaudi's work, but also how architects - sometimes - should hold back. "There are places and times to be willful," he offers.

In all of Mr. Markson's six decades of work, there are design elements - the shape of a bay window on a 1980s non-profit housing complex, a circulation plan in a 1970s co-op, or the exposed steel beams and swoopy curves of his 1950s- and '60s-era homes - that brand it as Markson modernism, regardless of how flamboyant or restrained the project.

And, like his former mews home tucked in behind those wonderful Tranby Victorians, his buildings are often delectable little secrets in parts of the city one wouldn't think to explore.

But make no mistake: Just as the birds of Tranby make the Annex a much richer neighbourhood, so too does Jerome Markson's architecture make Toronto a much richer city.